Hardy's Apprehensions

A. J. NICKERSON

CALEB SALEEBY wrote to Hardy in 1914 to ask whether he was correct in observing the similarity of his philosophical position in *The Dynasts* (1904) to that of Bergson in *Creative Evolution* (1907; published in English 1911). A few letters later, Saleeby's question about the philosophical position of the verse-drama had been reformulated by Hardy as an enquiry into the phenomenology of belief:

> Half my time (particularly when I write verse) I believe – in the modern use of the word – not only in the things Bergson does, but in spectres, mysterious voices, intuitions, omens, dreams, haunted places, etc., etc. But then I do not believe in these things in the old sense of belief any more for that.[1]

As Hardy adjusts the terms of this enquiry from the philosophical to the phenomenological, he reaches for a new vocabulary. The philosophical 'things' of Bergsonian philosophy are exchanged for the familiar phenomena of Hardy's poetry, 'spectres, mysterious voices, intuitions'. The abstract language of philosophy is adjusted, reinterpreted, and then replaced by the mysterious presences of poetry.

As Hardy begins to reorientate this enquiry towards the experience of knowledge and the language of poetry – that is, towards the phenomenology of poetic belief – the original term, 'belief', comes under increasing pressure. Hardy equivocates between the 'modern use' and the 'old sense' of the word, alert to

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the changing significance of 'belief' and the inexact correspondence between the meanings of words and the 'sense' of experience. 'Belief' is only possible 'half the time' and only under certain conditions. Writing (or reading) verse might be peculiarly conducive to such an experience of assent, but such a poetic 'belief' is still held in the uncertain interval between 'I believe' and 'I do not believe'. Hardy's fretful negotiations reveal his dissatisfaction with 'belief' as a description of the kinds of experience, knowledge, and assent that poetry might enable.

After so many adjustments, Hardy's correspondence with Saleeby breaks off shortly after this letter of 2 February 1915. This essay pursues this tacit, unfinished line of enquiry into the experiences of 'belief' that poetry might afford or, rather – since 'belief' has become an increasingly impossible description for the kinds of perception, participation, and meaning that become possible in verse – what might more usefully be termed poetic *apprehension*. 'Apprehension' tactfully negotiates between these diverse aspects of the phenomenology of writing (or reading) poetry, and is the word implicit in many of Hardy's attempts to imagine in verse the kinds of cognitive experience that it makes possible.

Hardy's letter suggests that apprehension comes in three varieties. First, his letter testifies to his preoccupation with the mind and its processes: apprehension understood as the mind's work of perception. His interest in Bergson's philosophy appears to have been twofold: he was sympathetic to Bergson's philosophy of mind, which resisted the materialist reduction of mind to matter and insisted on the spiritual nature of memory. This perhaps explains why Hardy extends the 'things … Bergson believes in' into other forms of disembodied and historic – but nevertheless personal – presence: 'spectres, mysterious voices … haunted places'. But despite Hardy's sympathy for Bergson's attempt ('You will see how much I want to be a Bergsonian'), he worried that it was ultimately unsuccessful: 'I fear that his philosophy is, in the bulk, only our old friend Dualism in a new suit – an ingenious fancy without real foundation' (*Letters*, p. 79) – a worry about that would resurface in a poem written five years later in 1920, 'Our Old Friend Dualism'. More

speculatively, Hardy would have been sympathetic to Bergson's notions of 'intuition' and 'duration' which emphasised the centrality of the subjective experience of time to our understanding of the world. These were concepts that Hardy would have encountered in *Creative Evolution*, loaned to him by Saleeby after he confessed he had never read Bergson. It is these reflections on the nature of apprehension that seem to be the 'things … Bergson believes in' and which Hardy was also inclined to believe when writing verse. These Bergsonian ideas are also the characteristics of Hardy's poetry – both are concerned with memory, immaterial presence, and the subjective experience of time – which may explain why writing verse enabled Hardy to assent to Bergson's philosophy. Bergson's ideas rang true to the particular experience of thinking under the conditions of verse, feeling its sensuous form and temporal patterning: Bergson's ideas about the mind's work of apprehension made sense of – but also made sense *in* – the processes of poetic thought. It is in this sense that Hardy describes Bergson as 'an imaginative and poetical writer' rather than a 'reasoner' (*Letters*, v. 78).

But Hardy is also interested in the way in which the mind's perception of the world is derived from the memory of sensuous encounter: apprehension that remembers the grasping of the hands. His 'spectres, mysterious voices, intuitions, omens, dreams, haunted places' are all forms of encounter in which the moment of perception is unloosed from the moment of sensuous encounter, the spectre and voice outliving the body, the prophetic vision preceding its sensuous realisation. These are all forms of imaginative encounter which have their origins in a sensuous reality but which become meaningful through its belated or premature recurrence in the mind. Hardy's 'spectres' or ghosts must therefore be understood not only as phenomena in the sensuous world but also as figures in the mind. Hardy's assertion to William Archer that he 'would cheerfully have given ten years of [his] life to see a ghost – an authentic, indubitable spectre'[2] – needs to be heard alongside his use of the ghost-figure to describe the nature of aesthetic experience when he describes the 'Gothic' as something which 'pass[es] into' stone but is itself 'an aesthetic phantom without solidity'.[3] Indeed, throughout his conversation with Archer, Hardy expresses a

scepticism towards 'the pitiful ineffectualness, even grotesqueness, of all the alleged manifestations of the spirit world' while still admitting the attraction of that world as 'another domain for the imagination to expatiate in'.[4] Tim Armstrong has begun to explore the centrality of haunting to Hardy's poetic imagination in *Haunted Hardy: Poetry, History, Memory* (2000), but he continues to explain it in terms of a particular interest in ghosts when Hardy's ghostly figures are frequently an emblem or an imaginative figure for those particular conditions of experience in which thinking becomes unloosed from its origin in the sensuous world. Hardy's interest in spectral forms is more often the outworking of a philosophic concern with the tentative forms of knowing made available in poetry.

Underlying these two forms of apprehension is a third: a sustained condition of apprehensiveness, a nervousness or wariness of committing fully to the conditions of spoken language, to the articulate 'views' and 'beliefs' of the philosopher. This apprehensiveness can be seen in Hardy's frequent recourse to the muted language of parenthesis, in his equivocations over 'belief', and in his unwillingness to bring his implicit 'apprehension' to the fore as a more precise articulation of the kinds of experience offered by poetry. This apprehensiveness about spoken language corresponds to the spectral, shadowy kinds of knowing that poetry offers – forms of apprehension that are tentative, uncertain, caught between the sensing hands and the perceiving mind, unloosed from their origins and discovered in the untimeliness of memory and prophecy.

So there are, then, three dominant themes in Hardy's tacit enquiry into the nature of poetic apprehension: the mind's processes of perception, its origin in sensuous encounter, and his wariness of articulating in spoken language the things that might be known or known of in poetry.[5] This enquiry into the nature of poetic apprehension – into the phenomenology of belief and the language of poetry – is a study of things on the cusp of perception, of things that are only uncertainly present: spectres, mysterious voices, omens. And this quality of apprehension shapes the sound of Hardy's poetry, the music that is heard beyond or which precedes its spoken language: a music heard in the ear, caught halfway between the sensuous

experience of the hands and the imaginative encounter of the mind, and which endlessly sustains the conditions of apprehension without ever becoming articulate.[6]

'Under the Waterfall' tells the story of a lovers' picnic. The chalice they used for wine is rinsed beneath a waterfall. One of them drops it and it becomes lodged deep in the plunge-pool. They search for it but cannot retrieve it. But this poem is not simply concerned with the story: it is preoccupied with the ways in which the story is remembered, the ways in which the past encounter becomes present once more to the mind as memory.

'Whenever I plunge my arm, like this,
In a basin of water, I never miss
The sweet sharp sense of a fugitive day
Fetched back from its thickening shroud of gray.
        Hence the only prime
        And real love-rhyme
        That I know by heart,
        And that leaves no smart,
Is the purl of a little valley fall
About three spans wide and two spans tall
Over a table of solid rock,
And into a scoop of the self-same block;
The purl of a runlet that never ceases
In stir of kingdoms, in wars, in peaces;
With a hollow boiling voice it speaks
And has spoken since hills were turfless peaks.'

'And why gives this the only prime
Idea to you of a real love-rhyme?
And why does plunging your arm in a bowl
Full of spring water, bring throbs to your soul?'

'Well, under the fall, in a crease of the stone,
Though precisely where none ever has known,
Jammed darkly, nothing to show how prized,
And by now with its smoothness opalized,
        Is a drinking glass:
        For, down that pass

My lover and I
Walked under a sky
Of blue with a leaf-wove awning of green,
In the burn of August, to paint the scene,
And we placed our basket of fruit and wine
By the runlet's rim, where we sat to dine;
And when we had drunk from the glass together,
Arched by the oak-copse from the weather,
I held the vessel to rinse in the fall,
Where it slipped, and it sank, and was past recall,
Though we stooped and plumbed the little abyss
With long bared arms. There the glass still is.
And, as said, if I thrust my arm below
Cold water in a basin or bowl, a throe
From the past awakens a sense of that time,
And the glass we used, and the cascade's rhyme.
The basin seems the pool, and its edge
The hard smooth face of the brook-side ledge,
And the leafy pattern of china-ware
The hanging plants that were bathing there.

'By night, by day, when it shines or lours,
There lies intact that chalice of ours,
And its presence adds to the rhyme of love
Persistently sung by the fall above.
No lip has touched it since his and mine
In turns therefrom sipped lovers' wine.'[7]

The chalice is the focus of this investigation into the nature of memory. It becomes a symbol for the sacraments of everyday life, for its forms of perfect participation – the sensuous immediacy of the brilliant summer's day and the undisturbed communion of the lovers. It is a symbol for immediate experience and complete knowledge. But it is not actually the chalice that is remembered in this poem , but the chalice veiled and inaccessible beneath the waterfall. The poem remembers the chalice sunk deep in a crease of the stone, lost to the plunge-pool and 'past recall' of searching hands. The chalice as it is remembered in its later condition beneath the waterfall becomes a symbol for

something different – the memory of those forms of loving and sensuous communion that are no more: the chalice and all that it stands for is 'past recall' because it has slipped under the waterfall and into the historic past.

'Past recall', however, also puns on the vocabulary of memory. It suggests that the chalice has slipped beyond the recovery of imaginative 'recall', unable to be fully remembered, recovered only in part or only with an unshakeable sense that it has nevertheless been irretrievably lost. This pun alerts us to the fact that this story is also an enquiry into the nature of remembering, the conditions that enable memory, and the nature of remembered experience. But this pun presents us with a puzzle: for if the chalice is indeed past the recall of memory and searching hands, how can it be repeatedly recalled in the poem, recurrently present as something that can (or, at least, might be) available to apprehension? Is it 'past recall' or not? Could it be 'past recall' in one sense and not 'past recall' in another – past the 'recall' of the hands while remaining in reach of the mind? The twin possibilities caught in this pun suggest that there might be different kinds of 'recall', different imaginative experiences that become available under different conditions of language, something which Hardy explores through small equivocations of textual detail, through the incidental word and its secondary inflections – in this instance, through the inflection of a pun.

Hardy offers two explanations for why the speaker of 'Under the Waterfall' is able to recall the presence of the chalice beneath the waterfall. The first explanation, given at the very beginning of the poem, is that the sweet sting of cold water against the arms in the washing-up bowl recalls the memory of a similar sensation: 'Whenever I plunge my arm, like this, / In a basin of water, I never miss / The sweet sharp sense of a fugitive day'. The second explanation, given throughout the poem, is that the sound of the waterfall endlessly reminds the speaker of the chalice beneath its waters. Hardy is, in effect, offering two definitions of apprehension, one literal and the other figurative. The first is that apprehension originates in the searching hands. The second is that apprehension is experienced in the mind or, more properly, in the ears, hovering halfway between sensuous

experience and imaginative encounter. Of these two models for apprehension, it is the latter that preoccupies Hardy in this poem: the direct sensuous encounter that prompts the telling of the story is quickly forgotten but the indirect recall of the waterfall's song becomes the persistent theme – the recurrent music and the enduring interest – of the poem.

But what kind of indirect apprehension does the waterfall's song enable? As the chalice slips out of reach and falls into the plunge-pool, it begins to inflect the sound of the waterfall:

> By night, by day, when it shines or lours,
> There lies intact that chalice of ours,
> And its presence adds to the rhyme of love
> Persistently sung by the fall above

The shape of the chalice in the plunge-pool forever after alters the quality of sound made by the waters of the cataract, 'adding' to its song. The sound of the waterfall continually testifies to the presence of the chalice within it; in fact, it is now only through the waterfall's sound that it is possible to know that the chalice is there. It can no longer be grasped with the hands but it can be known of through the sound of the waterfall – or rather through the *music* of the waterfall, for it is described in terms of aesthetically organised sound, as a rhyme of 'love' that is 'sung'. That seems to suggest that for Hardy the audible form of the song – or its companion form, the poem – enables a different kind of experience to that of our more normal sensuous encounter with the world. While the chalice held in the hands was a symbol for perfect participation and complete knowledge, the chalice heard in the waterfall's music is only *known of*, maintained in a condition of endless knowableness. It is not 'past recall' because it is still within hearing, yet it is not available to 'recall' because it is beyond the grasp of the hands. The attention that the waterfall's music requires is directed towards the physical world yet is curiously disembodied, a form of listening that finds traces of sensuous experience in the sound of the aesthetic form – of the waterfall's music, which does not make things known but creates the conditions in which things

become endlessly knowable: aesthetic attention discovers a new and more tentative grammar of imaginative experience.

'Under the Waterfall' is an odd poem: as a retelling of a story it is curiously repetitive and non-linear. In fact, the simple story of the search for the chalice in the plunge-pool is told four times: at the beginning of the poem – 'Whenever I plunge my arm, like this / In a basin of water'; then as a question in the second stanza – 'And why does plunging your arm in a bowl / Full of spring water bring throbs to your soul?'; then again in the third stanza – 'we stooped and plumbed the little abyss / With long bared arms'; and then finally and emphatically – 'And, as said, if I thrust my arm below / Cold water'. This poem does not unfold a narrative but instead evolves a recurrent music out of a few key words. These key words give the themes of the narrative ('bared arms', 'cold', 'water', 'plunging', 'basin', 'bowl') but are then repeated and dispersed to become the musical themes of Hardy's lyrical poem. The sound of this poem is, you could say, very much like the music of the waterfall – a recurrent pattern of sound inflected by the chalice submerged within it.

The connection between the music of the waterfall and the sound of the poem is brought out in the first dimeter quatrain:

> Hence the only prime
> And real love-rhyme
> That I know by heart,
> And that leaves no smart,
> Is the purl of a little valley fall

'Love-rhyme' is the clue to this connection. The 'love-rhyme' of the waterfall could simply pass as 'love-song' were it not for the fact that 'love-rhyme' *rhymes* ('prime' / 'love-rhyme'). This 'love-rhyme' describes the waterfall and the poem's own patterns of organisation: both forms can be understood in terms of rhyme. 'Prime' runs into resonance with 'rhyme' and quietly reinforces the importance of rhyming structures to both waterfall and poem. 'Prime' can mean perfectly achieved or adequate but it also holds an older, musical meaning of the 'lower of two notes forming an interval' or as 'the interval between the same

two notes formed by an unison' (*OED*, 'prime' *n.*2, 4b, 4d). 'Prime' like 'rhyme' describes a sonic relationship, the resonance that is the audible affinity of sounds.

'Rhyme', here, is a structure of resonance that bears a strong similarity to Hardy's tendency to re-sound the key words of his narrative throughout his poem but as a recurrent, diffuse music, rather than in uniquely signifying phrases. 'Rhyme' – understood in this broad sense as an initial sonic coincidence which then opens up, its parts falling out of relation and becoming dispersed into the structural music of the form – describes the most significant patterns of 'Under the Waterfall'. For example, the distinctive dimeter quatrain stanza-form is initially associated with the ongoing affective and mnemic significance of the waterfall:

> Hence the only prime
> And real love-rhyme
> That I know by heart,
> And that leaves no smart . . .

But this association is then broken apart. The vocabulary is reused in the longer lines of the second quatrain stanza:

> 'And why gives this the only prime
> Idea to you of a real love-rhyme?
> And why does plunging your arm in a bowl
> Full of spring water, bring throbs to your soul?'

And the dimeter quatrain stanza form is then reused a few lines later, but this time to continue the narrative rather than to reflect on the waterfall's significance:

> Is a drinking glass:
> For, down that pass
> My lover and I
> Walked under a sky.

The initial coincidence between stanza form and content opens up, its parts repeated and dispersed throughout the poem.

To give another example: these rhyme-like structures can also be heard in the background couplet-music of the poem. Paired rhyming lines produce distinctive moments of sound: 'ceases' / 'peaces'. But Hardy then situates these rhymes within longer phrases of modulated sound, diffusing the distinctive sound of the rhyming pair into an extended sequence of vowel-music: 'ceases' / 'peaces' / 'speaks' / 'peaks', 'green' / 'scene' / 'wine' / 'dine', 'lours' / 'ours' / 'love' / 'above'. Individual sounds seep into the structural music of the poem, a process of inflection that recalls or resembles the chalice's quiet alteration of the waterfall's song. The 'love-rhyme' of the waterfall and the rhyming structures of the poem thus constitute a kind of rhyme with each other, their shared patterns of organised sound producing a strange resonance in which the music of the waterfall is inseparable from the music of Hardy's lyric. 'Under the Waterfall' becomes the 'prime' expression of the waterfall's song: the same music sounded across two distinct forms but heard as a richly expressive consonance.

There is, however, one further rhyme for 'Under the Waterfall'. Hardy's stanzaic patterning remembers the visual and metrical form of Henry Vaughan's poem, 'The Water-fall' (1655). The visual likeness of the poems is striking. Both use heavily indented dimeter quatrains to make visible on the page (and audible within the prosody) the narrow passages of the waterfall's cataracts and creeks. And both poems exploit the conceit that the poem's sense might seem to flow down the page, constrained and inflected by the width of its passage, in imitation of the waterfall – and also, in Hardy's case, in imitation of 'The Water-fall'. But Hardy owes more to Vaughan than merely the shape of his stanzas. Vaughan understands the waterfall's sound as a music which contains submerged truths. He apostrophises the waterfall as a visible and audible lesson about human life: 'What sublime truths, and wholesome themes / Lodge in thy mystical, deep streams'.[8] Just as Hardy's chalice inflects the music of his waterfall, so these 'sublime truths' become the themes of the mystical water-music of Vaughan's waterfall. This is the idea that Hardy borrows from Vaughan – or rather recognises as an earlier expression of his own thinking, for it is an idea that preoccupies Hardy throughout his career as a poet. The fers an

experience neither 'wholesome' nor 'sublime' but one which endlessly offers up spectral encounters and irrecoverable memories, testifying to the phantasmal nature of apprehension under the conditions of verse.

In 'Under the Waterfall' Hardy tacitly suggests that in verse sensuous encounter becomes unloosed from the moment of perception. The two senses of apprehension drift apart; the processes of the mind no longer correspond to the movements of the hands. Instead, the enduring trace of past experience becomes the prompt for memory. This trace is caught between the material and the immaterial, originating in the sensuous world but perpetuated as a remembered form, a trace which finds its indeterminate existence in the recurrent music of verse. And this spectral trace produces a correspondingly shadowy form of apprehension, in which the forms of the sensuous world are endlessly made knowable but never, finally, become known.

But what of those kinds of apprehension in which imaginative perception is unmoored from sensuous experience and becomes the experience of memory, vision, and prophecy? Hardy's poem, 'The Souls of the Slain' (1899) begins with a description of the conditions under which the speaker enters into vision:

> The thick lids of Night closed upon me
> Alone at the Bill
> Of the Isle by the Race –
> Many-caverned, bald, wrinkled of face –
> And with darkness and silence the spirit was on me
> To brood and be still.
>
> (*Poems*, p. 92)

It is a scene of physical and sensuous isolation. This lack of sensation, however, is felt not as absence but as stifled presence, the 'thick lids of Night' closing with a claustrophobic closeness. 'Darkness and silence' are not vacancies but presences that begin to be felt as the spirit descends. And these conditions compel the speaker to 'brood and be still': this is the language of quelling and constraint. There are faint indications that participation in the sensuous world is possible – there is the possibility of touch, thought, and movement – but such sensory elements are

reduced to their most minimal expression. The speaker experiences instead the isolation of potential energy, of possibilities for meaningful sensuous encounter that cannot be realised.

The second stanza carries the speaker's sense of withheld sensation over into the physical world. Here, too, the scene is characterised by suppressed, potential energy:

> No wind fanned the flats of the ocean,
> Or promontory sides,
> Or the ooze by the strand,
> Or the bent-bearded slope of the land,
> Whose base took its rest amid everlong motion
> Of criss-crossing tides.

Here, in the natural world, there are no mutually animating interactions – there is barely any movement at all. There is 'no wind' to ruffle the 'flats of the ocean' or to disturb the cliffs, hilltops, or tidal waters. Individual parts of the scene move indiscernibly. The 'ooze' by the strand suggests the slow creep of water, but it is grammatically stilled, a noun rather than a verb. Again, 'whose base took its rest' almost suggests the slow, geological movement of the Jurassic coast, but the primary meaning is of settled immovability.

This condition of almost imperceptible sensation that characterises the speaker's experience and the natural world also characterises the sound of these opening stanzas. The poem emphasises the stillness, silence, and absence of wind that would make the ocean articulate, fanning it into motion and sound. Nevertheless, these stanzas articulate patterns of quietly recurrent sound. 'No wind fanned the flats of the ocean' – but the phrasing generates a gentle sequence of alternation between /n/ and /f/ sounds: *no* wi*nd f*a*nn*ed the *f*lats o*f* the ocea*n*. This is a sound pattern of subtle agitation, of fricative and stop, of fanning and responsive ebb. The motionless sea finds faint articulation in the poem's patterns of consonantal variation.

Similarly, in the middle lines of this stanza, the repeated 'or' draws attention to the quiet repetition and gradual expansion of the lines. Sounds quietly repeat within them – the /s/ sounds of the second line multiplied in the third, the plosives of the

third (/b/, /d/) multiplied in the fourth – and so extend the length of each subsequent line. The almost imperceptible movement of the tidal waters finds in the text a sound pattern of recurrent movement and flooding expansion.

These patterns of sound move across the surface of the text, articulating forms of sensuous experience that barely exist in the world described. The fanning of the wind can be quietly heard in the text when it cannot be heard in the scene described; and the flooding of the waters can be traced in these sound patterns when it is almost imperceptible on the sands. The patterns of the text realise the sensuous potential of the scene in a superlative example of what Jane Thomas describes as Hardy's tendency to exemplify 'the artist/poet's aesthetic desire to push beyond the recognisable limits of language in order to "bring forth a new presence in the world", and in the word'.[9] In 'Under the Waterfall' the sound of the text remembered a real, historic experience; in this poem the sound of the text explores the potential and unrealised possibilities of the sensuous world: for this is vision rather than memory.

'Vision' for Hardy always has an uncertain relation to the material world. In this poem, the scriptural resonances of, 'the spirit was on me' suggest that this vision is an encounter in the mind, things seen and felt but only in the imagination. But while these visions occur in the mind, they are also dependent on an intensely present physical world. This physical world is sensed as a presence full of unrealised possibilities, but not touched or directly known – the most tentative, most apprehensive encounter with the physical world that might be possible. The opening stanzas of 'The Souls of the Slain' suggest a retreat into the mind, the thick lids of night closing on the sensuous world as one might close one's eyes the better to engage the imagination. But this retreat into the mind is accompanied by an intense awareness of the physical context and its suppressed energy. This awareness is registered in the quiet sound patterns of the opening stanzas: a retreat into the mind, accompanied by a recurrent sonic trace of the sensuous world, becomes the context for Hardy's vision.

There are many instances of poems in which Hardy's visions are prompted and then sustained by these almost inaudible

clues from the sensuous world. In 'The Shadow on the Stone', for example, it is the 'sound of a leaf' falling in the garden that enables Hardy to 'envision' the shadow of the gardening Emma (*Poems*, p. 530). In 'The Voice', it is the 'wind in its wistlessness' that brings the apparition of the woman in her 'air-blue gown' (p. 346). In 'A Singer Asleep', it is the sound of the 'unslumbering sea' that enables Hardy to 'hold in thought' the ghostly meeting of Swinburne and Sappho at the 'water's brim' (pp. 323-5). In each case, the almost inaudible sensuous prompt is reproduced as a recurrent sonic trace in the poem's aesthetic form, and this trace becomes the condition for vision. And in each instance, this sensuous prompt also determines something of the character of the apparition: the falling leaf brings the falling shade, the sound of the wind calls up the woman in her airy gown, the noise of the waves summons the two great poets of the sea.

The third stanza of 'The Souls of the Slain' begins to indicate how this sonic trace creates the conditions for and determines the character of vision:

> Soon from out of the Southward seemed nearing
> A whirr, as of wings
> Waved by mighty-vanned flies,
> Or by night-moths of measureless size,
> In softness and smoothness well-nigh beyond hearing
> Of corporal things.
>
> (*Poems*, p. 93)

The 'criss-crossing tides' at the close of the second stanza become the sonic motive for the third, their patterns of sibilance unfolding into 'Soon from out of the Southward seemed nearing'. After establishing the sonic continuity between these stanzas, the third stanza then begins to rework a phrase from the second stanza – 'No wind fanned the flats of the ocean'. 'Wind fanned' is echoed and expanded in 'Waved by mighty-vanned'. The rhyme 'fanned' / 'vanned' remembers the fricative agitation of the /f/-n/ patterning of the earlier stanza. 'Waved' slips in an idea of the waves that were absent from the previous stanza, which were not fanned into being by the movement of the wind. 'Waved' then becomes an aerial motion, a flapping of the wind

that is oddly like the wind that was not moving in the earlier stanza. The noisy 'whirr' and the rapid movement of 'mighty-vanned flies' becomes the violent fanning of the wind that did not happen in the second stanza. An image begins to emerge in the third stanza – something not even as substantial as an image, but a simile within a vision – out of the absences of the prior stanza. It takes up the peripheral details of the barely noticed world, traced in the sound patterns of the poem, and transforms them into a vivid imaginary experience within the mind.

Crucially, the basis for this transformation is the gradual awareness of these nearly inaudible patterns of sound. The simile (like 'mighty-vanned flies') emerges in order to explain the 'nearing' sound of a 'whirr'. This 'whirr' is the prompt for vision, the faint sound that gradually becomes significant. But what exactly is this 'whirr'? Where does it come from? It has its origins in the text, in the faint patterns of sound that start as a meaningless 'whirr' but gradually develop into phrases and images – just as the patterns of sound and rhyme eventually resolve into the 'mighty-vanned flies'. This 'whirr', then, is the sound of the text's patterns of sound. But its origin goes further back. As suggested above, these textual patterns of sound have their origin in the physical world, tracing out the unrealised possibilities of the sensuous realm. They were a record of the wind and flood that could not be perceived on the sands but which come to quiet notice in the sound of the poem: the sound of the text becomes the context for vision because it makes felt the potential, withheld energy of the sensuous world. Under the visionary conditions of verse-music, new kinds of apprehension are discovered, kinds of apprehension previously disallowed or unavailable under the constraints of immediate sensuous encounter. This is what Dennis Taylor – with a sense of its difficulty, if not of its imaginative potential – describes as an 'ocean-led brooding' which nevertheless intimates 'an ominous and ultimate discontinuity between man and nature'.[10] As the mind withdraws, these slight poetic sounds maintain a quiet awareness of the possibilities of the surrounding world, and this becomes the context for vision.

These slight poetic sounds are a memory or trace, a reverberation of the physical world and its past conditions and future

possibilities. They are the memory of the lost chalice, the weak sound of the wind, the gentle and perpetual sound of the falling leaf, the music of the unslumbering sea. When these traces are listened to they do not recover the sensuous reality of lost experience; rather, they bring into being visionary presences and recurrent memories – sensuous experiences that occur only in the mind but which originate in the possibilities of the material world. The subdued music of the verse is, as Hardy puts it in 'The Souls of the Slain', the place where we can come to know of but never finally apprehend these 'sprites without mould / Formless souls none might touch or might hold'.

To hear this subdued music, however, requires listening for a 'softness and smoothness well-nigh beyond hearing / Of corporal things'. Hardy gently teases his corporal reader with the ambiguity of these sounds 'well nigh beyond hearing'. Are these sounds well out of reach, too subtle, too barely-there for us to apprehend? Or are they nearly – but not quite – beyond us, at the very limit of human hearing? His poetics become spectral, calling into question the reality of these delicate kinds of listening on which these tentative experiences of apprehension seem to depend: perhaps the ghostly 'whirr' of poetry is nothing more than an auditory hallucination, a fantasy of the evocative power of poetic language. But at the moment at which Hardy nearly gives an account of his poetics – of the kinds of listening that it requires and the experiences of apprehension that it offers – he turns our attention back to the quiet equivocations of poetic language, to the ghostly possibilities that dwell in that place 'well-nigh beyond hearing'. In a move that is characteristic of his poetry and prose, he avoids an explicit formulation of his poetics, choosing instead to sustain the brooding moment of poetry, listening in to the reverberations of its inarticulate language and waiting on the phantoms that it breeds.

University of Cambridge

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NOTES

[1] *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1985), v. 79. Further references to Hardy's letters are given in the text.

[2] William Archer, *Real Conversations* (London, 1904), p. 37.

[3] *The Public Voice of Thomas Hardy: The Essays, Speeches, and Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Michael Millgate (Oxford, 2001), p. 250.

[4] Archer, *Real Conversations*, p. 45.

[5] See Angela Leighton's survey of possible alternative grammars for speaking about the experience offered by poetry: *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford, 2007), p. 28.

[6] See Francesco Marroni, 'Poet, Poetry, Poem', in Phillip Mallett (ed.), *Thomas Hardy in Context* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 143-52, for an alternative, contextually orientated account of why Hardy chose poetry as the form in which to address questions of belief.

[7] *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 335-7. Further references are given in the text.

[8] *Henry Vaughan: The Complete Poems*, ed. Alan Rudrum (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 307.

[9] Jane Thomas, *Thomas Hardy and Desire: Conceptions of the Self* (Basingstoke, 2013), p. 166.

[10] Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Poetry, 1860-1928* (London, 1981), p. 12.